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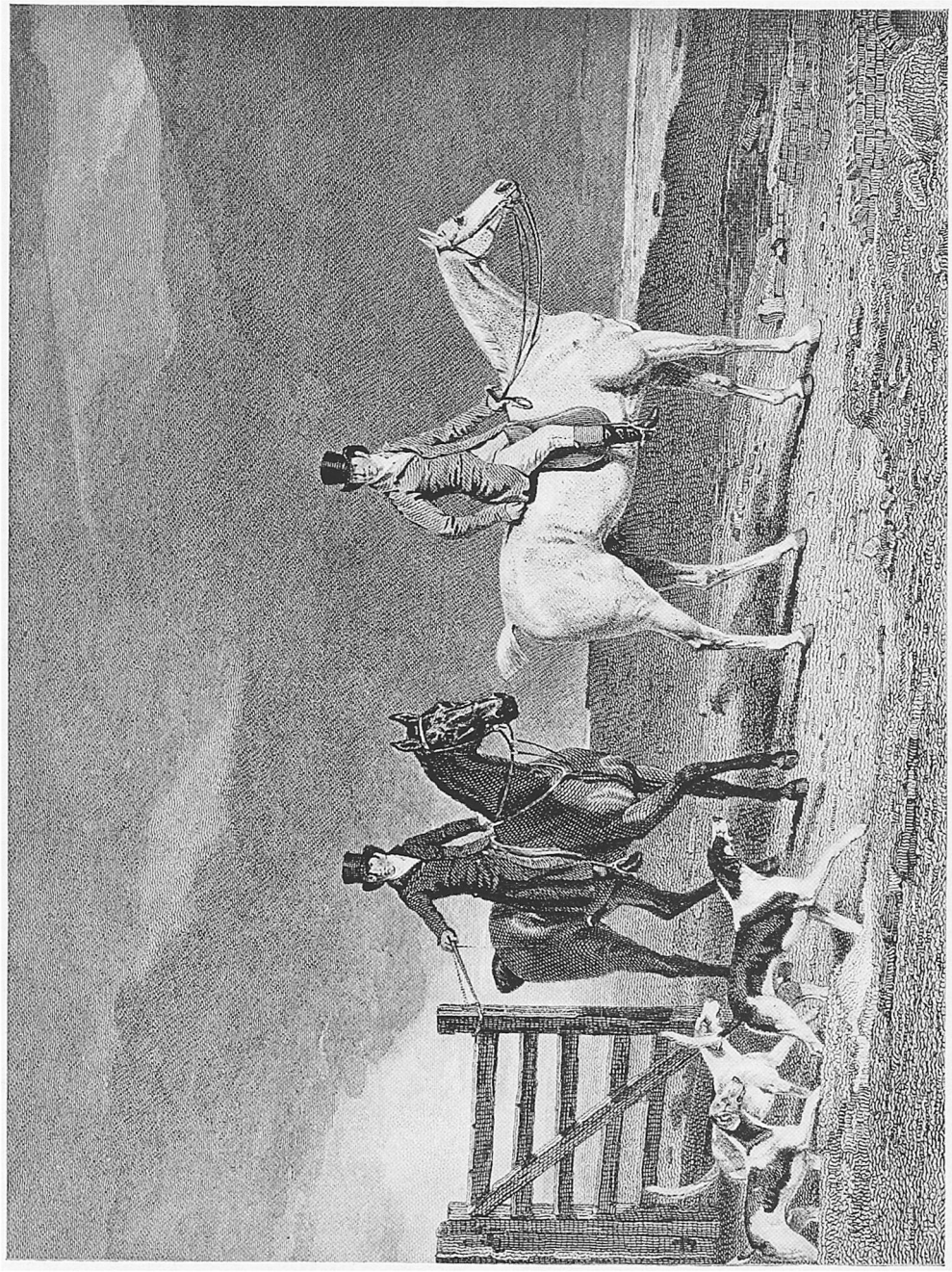
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The Hunter

THE OLD-TIME HUNTER

AN old-time English writer on sport, whose name I wish I could recall, wrote about 1830, an article inspired by Benjamin Marshall's capital picture, "The Hunter." While what is said in the article must be considered with reference to the time to which it refers, it can be read with profit by the trainer and owner of hunters today, and with pleasure by any one interested in the horse. The writer calls attention to the fact that English hunting is a peculiar system, that seems to have taken rise at some period almost immediately subsequent to the Wars of the Roses, previous to which, English hunting, like that still in part prevailing upon the continent, was of a military complexion, and often consisted of the pursuit of dangerous wild animals, then to be found in England, the wolf and the boar. Hunting is no longer a military parade with offensive weapons, but a jovial assembly in the field, of nobles, gentry, and yeomanry of property; the former attended by their servants; all in neat and elegant riding dress; the huntsmen with their horns; and the whippers-in upon their game and seasoned hunters. The object of the present hunting system is simply a pursuit, or race, between the hunting horse and hounds and the beast of chase, under certain fair and equal laws and regulations.

The English hunter, as the old-time sporting authorities describe him, is generally a horse between fifteen and sixteen hands in height, from the half-bred to the thoroughbred species; and ought to be of a lofty forehead, and shoulder well formed for action, with wide and substantial loins, moderately short legs and pasterns, and sound feet. A fashion of riding full-bred and speedy horses was equally prevalent in the beginning, indeed original in the system. But this chiefly takes place in England in light land countries. Upon strong and heavy soils, a powerful well-shaped half-bred horse may perform satisfactorily, and make a good figure, but upon light lands and downs, the speed and rate of the high-bred courser are too much above his powers, and he cannot long hold way in such superior company. But on general consideration, the three part or seven-eighth bred horse is best adapted to the purpose of hunting, since, at the same time, acknowledging the superiority of the thoroughbred horse, it is so extremely different to obtain him of a sufficiently fixed and substantial form.

Duncombe, the centre of the picture that accompanies this article, is a good model of the hunter nearly thoroughbred; whilst the servant is mounted upon a showy figure of the third-part bred hunter. In Duncombe is discovered a broad and substantial loin, with the muscular swell in the shoulder and quarter, and solid substance of the thigh and forearm, which indicate a well-bred horse in good hunting condition.

Hunting is obviously one of the most severe labours of the horse, yet one that is so generally attractive to him, that there are well authenticated anecdotes of old hunters inspired by the music of their fellow-sportsmen, the hounds, breaking pasture over the most dangerous fences, following the chase, and coming first in at the death! The writer had a mare which performed thus, taking a most desperate leap over a lofty-pointed paling, on the other side of which was a wall, which it is almost a miracle that she cleared. The joints of a horse cannot be sufficiently fixed until six years old, to go through with safety a season's hunting; although at five he should be cautiously and moderately used in the field. His education consists chiefly in being taught to leap a bar, standing, since generally, all horses will take a flying leap, in some form or other. The practice of the leaping bar furzed around, is well known; but some grooms are too hasty and speedy with the young horse, whence many of the irritable tempers can never be afterwards made staunch leapers.

The Irish horses are renowned as leapers, both standing and flying, to be attributed in some measure to their form, sharp and frigate-built, but more to the indefatigable training bestowed upon them, and to the desperation of Hibernian riders, which has often ended in the ruin of a horse, and not seldom to the breaking of the rider's bones, or to the master-bone—his neck. There has been reckless killing of hunters. Two grooms were drinking at a public-house bar, one upon his master's hunter, then in exercise: the bet of a cup of whiskey was made, that the horse could not clear a neighboring wall. The height of it, viewed from the horse's back, was tremendous. Nevertheless, the groom offered the leap standing to his nag. The horse, after a little hesitation, reluctantly refused the offer. Upon this, the half-mad groom, turning his horse about, and cantering him at a considerable distance, turned him again, and with his riding switch up about the horse's ears, ran him at the wall. The generous horse, ashamed to refuse a second time, made a desperate leap; but being incapable of o'ertopping such an altitude, his forefeet struck against the summit; yet the violence of his exertion carrying him over, grounded on the other side on his head and forequarters, both his fore legs being broken in the fall, so that he had to be shot. Who would have wondered, had the master proved equally mad with his servant and shot him also!

As a memento and caution to young men, the following unfortunate fact, within the writer's personal knowledge, but of quite an opposite kind, merits a place here. An Essex yeoman of considerable property, about one and twenty years of age, jolly and good-natured, and on the point of matrimony, was riding his hunter over the farm. In stopping to unfasten a five-barred gate, his heel touched the horse's side. The obedient hunter, mistaking it for a signal to take the gate, made his leap whilst it was swinging, and his hinder legs being entangled, he came down upon his unfortunate master's body, and crushed him instantly to death! It was a full hour before any witness arrived; and the noble and generous horse was



"Throwing Off"

standing close by his dead master, as if sensible of and lamenting his fate.

There is yet one or more example to be given, which appertains to the gallant subject of leaping. Some gentlemen, being shooting in Cambridgeshire, on the estate of Lord Francis Godolphin Osborne, the noble and liberal successor of the proprietor of the famous Godolphin Arabian, they incidentally put up a herd of cows, which in great fright took full speed. Their course led to a five-barred gate, when to the astonishment of the sportsmen, the foremost cow of the hunt leaped and cleared the gate as neatly as the staunchest hunter. It is a fact, however, that an old and experienced writer describes the cow as the best, if not the highest of standing leapers, and advises grooms to teach their horses on the bar, to clear their hinder quarters in the leap, like a cow.

Training the hunter is a simple practice, all that is required being to bring him into good wind, without at the same time, reducing him too low in flesh, or injuring his sinews; since, on a long chase, more especially over a heavy country, the horse needs the aid of his full bodily strength, and of his unimpaired tendenous and muscular powers. It is extremely dangerous to ride a horse over the country, which is weak in his joints, or has a common hurt in his back sinews, but the danger is tenfold, in taking a flying leap upon such a horse, where the opposite descent is considerable, and the stress upon his lower limbs and his landing with a heavy weight upon his back must be excessive. Training must commence with two or three doses of physic, should the horse be gross, and not have been previously trained.

A young horse, in his first training, will require most work; but it is an error on the surest side, rather to underdo this business, than exceed, because, if a horse come into a field rather under-worked, being full of good meat and heart, the easy remedy is to favour and ride him carefully the first week or two, but should your training groom set you upon a horse harrassed and winded by too much exercise, he will get worse as the season advances, and perhaps be totally ruined by the end; exclusive of the probable disgrace of failing you in a long and important day. Old hunters from spring grass, which they ever ought to enjoy, can scarcely be trained too lightly; the true test is, that their wind in its course be free and unembarrassed; to this point, however, their exercises must at any rate extend. The lighter the horse's clothing the better, in view of the heats and colds he must necessarily go in the chase. An early morning's gallop, at a good steady stride, but not speedy, of a mile or two, with a canter afterward in the forenoon is sufficient for the hunter, and two months ought to bring him into good condition. A young horse may have, once a week, a tolerably sharp rally over one or two miles, a method which should never be practiced with a seasoned hunter, to which, indeed, walking exercises may be often substituted for the gallop.

This old-time sporting authority mentions the steeple hunt, which then (about 1830) appears to have been a novelty, as a match of sweepstakes across the country, over hedge, ditch and gate, between two or more sports-

men upon their hunters. This very hazardous adventure is held in high estimation by some, who aver that their example is a great inspiration to courage and gallantry, and the contempt of whatever may befall. Others insist that, foolhardiness never shows a salutary example; that, naught is never in danger, and that it is of the smallest possible consequence to the world, whether a man of his kidney break his neck, or return with it whole. "Leaving the decision of this knotty point to casuists, clerical and lay, I simply state the facts. We have had occasional, but few revivals of these old practices, the chief misery of which is, the risk of crippling and condemning to a painful existence, the noblest and best animals in the country." What would this writer think of the steeplechase as a regular fixture in racing?

A RACY SPORTING WRITER

IT has been well said that the English writer on sport, who called himself the "Druid," was, in his way, a genius. His sympathy with everything in nature was so strong that, a well known statesman of his day said of him, "he can even make you feel interested in pigs." In his writings he preserved that racy phraseology in which the huntsmen of from 1830-1860, would describe the pack "screaming over the fallows;" how after "a blazing hour," they "blew him up in the open," or "raced into him and ate him" on the hills. He had a complete understanding of these men. They knew they could talk to him quite freely and never be misunderstood; and this gives a vigour and picturesqueness to his work lacking in that of others. Take Jem Hills' unanswerable explanation of his capacities: "I had four brothers with hounds; we were by an earth-stopper from a huntsman's daughter, so we couldn't be better bred." An earth-stopper, it may be explained, is an English hunt-servant who goes over country at night and stops up the holes in which a fox might find refuge.

The "Druid's" description of the death of Tom Sebright is as touching a picture as can be found in all sporting literature. "Don't you see them," he asked his daughter. "They're all round my bed. There's old Bluecap and Shiner, and Bonny Lass wagging her stern." "No, no, father," she replied, "you're mistaken." "Ah! they've gone now. Strange, isn't it, I should see them so plain?"

He never saw them again. For him, as for Will Goodall, they could only swell that strange, mournful requiem which arose from the kennel, and fairly thrilled through the mourners as the hearse moved away.